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Sallust's Histories and Triumviral Historiography: Confronting the End of History

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Jennifer Gerrish, *Sallust's Histories and Triumviral Historiography: Confronting the End of History*. London; New York: Routledge, 2019. Pp. 158. ISBN 9781138218567. \$150.00.

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[Preview](#)

These are exciting times for the study of Sallust. The book under review comes after the publication of Rosenblitt's *After Sulla* earlier this year (London: Bloomsbury; see BMCR [2019.08.15](#)). Gerrish's book—which began life as a doctoral thesis—consists of five chapters. The introduction highlights the basic assumption of the book: It focuses on Sallust's difficulties in writing history during a period in which the triumvirs manipulated or erased the past, “replacing facts with a more favorable narrative” (2). In his *Histories*—which the book nicely sets out to analyse as a whole, and there is much merit in this approach—Sallust wanted to narrate the aftermath of Sulla's dictatorship, a period with remarkable similarities to that of the so-called second triumvirate (3). As a result, in retrojecting the 30s into the 70s BCE, Sallust represents a “biting critique” of the triumvirate (3). Gerrish reminds us (5) that Augustus reduced his account of the civil wars in the *Res Gestae* to a few sanitised comments. But this picture, often unobjectionable, nevertheless needs to be qualified in my view. There is little reason to disagree with the word “sanitised”, yet Augustus does prominently mention *bellum civile* twice in his work (3.1; 34.1). Furthermore, the autobiography of Augustus should

not be forgotten. In it, Augustus will have had to engage much more fully with the upheavals of the outgoing Republic, as indeed the surviving fragments suggest.

Chapter 1, *Reading the Histories*, outlines how Sallust's historiographical method responds to the disorder of the Late Republic. Gerrish duly notes that the fragmentary state of the *Histories* complicates broader conclusions about the work as a whole. She argues that aggressive or fanciful reconstructions are best avoided, and notes that since Sallust died in 35 BCE, he could not have known the outcome of the triumvirate under which he wrote (Augustus and monarchy; 9). But we might add that the most likely outcome of civil war was renewed civil war, a lesson well understood by Sallust. Gerrish does in fact recognise this: Sextus Pompeius was defeated, but the conflict between the two remaining triumvirs was unresolved (12, cf. 60). This may after all be an overstatement, as the triumvirs were working hard to avoid conflict in much of the 30s. Gerrish helpfully highlights the potential common ground among literary authors of the triumviral period (12–18, building on J. Osgood, *Caesar's Legacy* [Cambridge, 2006]); so a useful guide to this complex period might be profitably expanded. Gerrish's survey focuses on the best preserved evidence, and the common ground of these authors could be further elucidated by the rich fragmentary evidence of the *FRHist*. In summing up this survey, Gerrish emphasises the pervading sense of hopelessness and civil war trauma. The concept of "impact" is perhaps to be preferred as it is broader and may help us realise that even if civil war is and was a terrible thing, actors still needed to address and justify it openly. ¹ Gerrish concludes that the *concordia* of the triumvirs still looks like the *discordia* of the past (18). Be this as it may, but Sallust's scope seems to be broader. He emphasises that participation in politics had become disgraceful (21). Even language was thrown into disruption by civil war (26; cf. 43–47; Thuc. 3.82.4). At 1.12R/1.12M, Sallust relates to the period after 146 BCE as one of political violence, *stasis* and *bellum civile*. This is a fine description of the Late Republic.

Chapter 2, *Analogical Historiography*, focuses on the method by which Sallust criticised contemporary politics and society through his portrayal of the past. Gerrish claims that the triumvirs attempted to disguise their civil wars as other types of conflict

(36). There is perhaps a need here for a different emphasis. The main assignment of the triumvirate was to constitute the state, including ending the civil war and the bringing of peace (App. *B Civ.* 4.2; 4.9; 5.43; *RG* 1.4). In that context, are Sallust's criticisms in the *Histories* really devoted entirely to the triumvirs? The simpler answer comes from Sallust's reception of Thucydides: The main subject of the *Histories* is the recurrence of *stasis* and civil war. Gerrish finds parallels between the relabelling of the revolt of Lepidus at Perusia (38–39), but after Perusia no triumph was given to Young Caesar. Furthermore, even though the war is absent from the *RG*, it was part of Augustus' autobiography (the famous story of the fall of Perusia is found in Appian (*B Civ.* 5.42–45, who mentions the *hypomnemata*; *FRHist* II, 886–889 [F8])). Nobody claimed that this was not a civil war. Similarly, after Philippi no triumphs were given to the victors (mentioned, 40–41); it was evidently a civil war, and therefore a triumph over dead citizens was deemed inappropriate. That is why L. Antonius wanted the triumvirs to give back their powers; the assignment had been accomplished and the civil war had ended. The triumvirs responded by inventing new tasks to justify their position, including Parthia and Sextus Pompeius. The latter is a fine example of the triumvirs' approach to the definition of civil war: Young Caesar labelled him a pirate (43). But there were two non-conflicting narratives (one triumphal [pirate] and one triumviral [the ending of civil war]): in 36 BCE, Young Caesar was given an honorific column on the Forum, with an inscription: "Peace, long disrupted by civil war, he restored on land and sea" (App. *B Civ.* 5.130; *stasis* is a translation of *bellum civile*; cf. *B Civ.* 5.132). Young Caesar/Augustus did not downplay civil war (so 43). On page 41–42, *seditio* is rightly emphasised as a precursor of *bellum civile*. This more than anything reflects well on the basic approach of Sallust: from violence over *stasis* to *bellum civile* (adding recurrence; Thuc. 3.82.2 is rightly mentioned, 47). This is not only a critique of the triumvirs, but of human nature, and a description of the Late Republic in broader terms. Gerrish is well aware that some of these allusions are less than certain (42) and rightly concludes that the *Histories* were not only an "elaborate allegory" and a critique of the triumvirs. The allusions function as an interpretive exercise for Sallust's readers (43). On page 48, Gerrish rightly concludes that the recurrence of civil war—albeit not stated directly—is implicit in all of Sallust's writing. This may even be traumatic repetition

(49), but we may add that this theme is not isolated to the triumvirs alone in Sallust. The Augustan regime did not struggle to negotiate its relationship with civil war (so 49): It clearly embraced the claim that it had ended them (most clearly, *RG* 34.1). The collective trauma was if anything used (or abused) by Young Caesar/Augustus. He ended what was begun by others.

Chapter 3, *Historians in the Histories*, focuses on Sallust's use of characters "as analogues for the figure of the historian in order to explore his anxieties about the continuing relevance of historiography" (73). The chapter begins with a question: who can write history? The *Res Gestae* is once again presented as an example of revisionist history (74), which of course it was, but perhaps less so in relation to civil war. Gerrish mentions a "purge" of civil war documents in this survey (74), but this seems to place a mistaken emphasis upon Appian, *B Civ.* 5.132. This passage is better read together with 5.130 on the ending of the civil war after Naulochus. Young Caesar ended the civil war 'begun' by Sextus; as a consequence, he burned civil-war documents (a political gesture), and offered to relinquish the powers of the triumvirate if Antonius would do the same (assignment accomplished; *contra* 75–76). A better example of a reframing is the war against Sertorius (76–88), but this was altogether easier as it was fought in Spain. Spartacus ends the chapter on the continued writing of history (92): Spartacus was in need of a historian and clearly got one. According to Gerrish, the key theme underlying these narratives is the ability to speak of those whom the triumvirs would silence (94). This is a bold reading of Sallust.

Chapter 4, *Digressive Digressions*, suggests that the triumvirs claimed to have restored the Republic and ended civil war (106). The word 'constituting' seems preferable, as this was part of the triumviral title and assignment. Its completion finally came after the victory of Young Caesar against Antonius and Cleopatra at Actium and Alexandria in 31–30 BCE. Young Caesar declared war on Cleopatra. She then logically received help from Antonius, turning the war into a civil war, begun anew by Antonius and once again quelled by Young Caesar (note the plural of *bellum civile* in *RG* 34.1). That the triumvirate made a mockery of traditional Roman government (107) may be correct, but the point is this: Even in times of civil war, the triumvirs wanted and needed to

justify their doings. Gerrish focuses on two digressions: *Scylla* and the *Blessed Isles*. Sextus Pompeius used Scylla and consequently Scylla in Sallust alludes to Sextus (111). As he could not write the name Sextus, he instead preferred Scylla. Gerrish uses *RG* 25 to prove the point about Sextus the pirate. Two letters written by Young Caesar from 36 BCE accuse Sextus Pompeius of encouraging piracy also support this (App. *B Civ.* 5.77, 80). *The Blessed Isles* is the story of the self-destructive nature of the period. Sertorius considers escaping to the Isles but is forced to face the realities of war. Sallust raises the possibility of an alternative history, but dismisses it (123). Gerrish's reading unites subtle and plausible claims with some more difficult assertions. The conclusion to the chapter (132) suggests that "Pompey was bad, and Octavian was worse"; this seems problematic, based as it is on the assumption that Young Caesar downplayed the notion of civil war. However, her interpretation of the *Blessed Isles* scenario is plausible: "a counterfactual version of Roman history in which Rome was *not* destroying itself in civil war" (130).

The last chapter, *Triumviral Historiography and the End of History* (echoing Francis Fukuyama?), begins with the following statement: "[Sallust's] final years saw the Roman state shaken to its core by economic crisis, famine, factionalism, and civil war" (146). This is undoubtedly correct and is a good description of the Late Republic. There is little reason to exclude the possibility that Sallust criticised the triumvirs. Gerrish is undoubtedly correct, although perhaps emphasises this point a little too fully. Why would this have been his *main* aim? Sallust was not in direct competition with the triumviral narrative (147), and indeed in many ways supplemented it. The main difference is that Sallust could not see a way out of the crisis; Young Caesar, on the other hand, could and finally did: monarchy. There is no denying that Augustus was a cruel and duplicitous politician (150; Gerrish's claim that Augustus 'whitewashed' his way to power is complicated by the *Staatsstreich* in *RG* 1.1). But the same might be said of all major dynasts in the Late Republic.

To reiterate, Gerrish shows correctly, and often convincingly, the ways in which Sallust's *Histories* critiqued the actions of the triumvirs. However, the need to assert this point in the end places a little too much emphasis upon it to the exclusion of other

readings. To read Sallust's history as *mainly* a critique of the triumvirs seems problematic. Sallust is critical of all civil war and all warring parties, including also a broader discussion on human nature. The reservations on the topic of civil war expressed here notwithstanding, this book is a good example of a modern historiographical approach. It is concise and readable at 158 pages, and it is partly that concision that complicates some of its readings: A fuller treatment would surely nuance the 'triumviral' reading of the *Histories* pursued by Gerrish. Not every reader will agree with the author, nor indeed with this reviewer; Gerrish's analysis will undoubtedly inspire debate. Let us hope that these exciting times for Sallust continue.

Notes:

[1.](#) Regarding impact, see Osgood 2006; H. Börm *et al.*, *Civil War in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Stuttgart, 2016); C. H. Lange & F. J. Vervaet, *The Historiography of Late Republican Civil War* (Leiden, 2019) with further bibliography.